

Recognition of different strategy in response to developments in Syria

Reconocimiento de una estrategia diferente en respuesta a los acontecimientos en Siria

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ABSTRACT

The Syrian crisis is one of the most challenging security and political events within side the Middle East. Each of the actors within side the worldwide area has taken one-of-a-kind strategies to the traits in Syria primarily based totally on their interests. The strategy of the USA and Russia as two world superpowers has continuously been manifested in various forms. The purpose of this study was to understand the type of strategy of the USA and Russia towards the developments in Syria. The research question was “what policy do the USA and Russia pursue in their new strategy towards the developments in Syria?” In response to the question, it has been hypothesized that the USA has pursued an aggressive and active policy towards the developments in Syria so as to realize its interests and goals, whereas Russia’s strategy in Syria has been to support the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Therefore, in the current study, various aspects of the US and Russian strategies in response to the Syrian crisis have been studied and evaluated using descriptive-analytical methods.

Keywords: United States, Russia, Developments in Syria, Strategy, Aggressive Realism, Strategic Interests

RESUMEN

La crisis siria es uno de los eventos políticos y de seguridad más desafiantes dentro del Medio Oriente. Cada uno de los actores dentro del área ha adoptado estrategias únicas para las características de Siria, basadas totalmente en sus intereses. La estrategia de EE. UU. y Rusia como dos superpotencias mundiales se ha manifestado continuamente de diversas formas. El propósito de este estudio fue comprender el tipo de estrategia de los EE. UU. y Rusia frente a los acontecimientos en Siria. La pregunta de investigación fue “¿qué política siguen los EE. UU. y Rusia en su nueva estrategia hacia los desarrollos en Siria?” En respuesta a la pregunta, se planteó la hipótesis de que EE. UU. ha

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seguido una política agresiva y activa hacia los acontecimientos en Siria para hacer realidad sus intereses y objetivos, mientras que la estrategia de Rusia en Siria ha sido apoyar al régimen de Bashar al-Assad. Por lo tanto, en el presente estudio, se han evaluado varios aspectos de las estrategias de EE. UU. y Rusia en respuesta a la crisis siria utilizando métodos descriptivos-analíticos.

Palabras clave: Estados Unidos, Rusia, Desarrollos en Siria, Estrategia, Realismo Agresivo, Intereses Estratégicos

INTRODUCTION

In September 2015, Russian President (Vladimir Putin) ordered the Russian army to support Syrian President (Bashar al-Assad), who was in the fifth year of the war against domestic and foreign opposition. Until then, the Russian government had provided weapons to the Syrian government, but the turn of Putin's foreign policy since 2015 and its military support have helped Assad to remain steadfast. With the start of Putin's military intervention in Russia in 2015, the course of events in Syria changed. Russia has diplomatically backed President Assad because after 2015, peaceful opposition protests turned into armed resistance. In this regard, in September 2015, he intervened in the war with an air group against the insurgent forces. (Allison, 2013: 84). Although initially touted as a counter-terrorism campaign, Putin has stated from the outset that the broader goal has been to consolidate legal authority and create the conditions for a political compromise (Interfax, 2015). Putin described at military meetings how "the armed forces of the Russian Federation continue to contribute to the peace process in the Syrian Arab Republic" and stressed that "the political will shown by Russia and its partners ... play a decisive role in stopping the bloodshed" and "guarantee a peaceful life in Syria." (Lewis, 2022:662). But it is clear that Russia's goal in entering Syria and supporting Assad is to maintain its influence and power in the international environment.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Numerous Persian and English sources have been written about the Syrian crisis. In these sources, a group has examined the relations of the actors involved in the developments in Syria from a historical and paleontological perspective. Major analytical-theoretical approaches in order to understand the approach of influential actors in the Syrian crisis have used theories such as aggressive realism, divergence in international relations, balance of threat, geopolitics and deterrence. The following are just a few examples of them that are more relevant to the topic of the present article. Hamid Darj and Ali Bagheri Dolatbadi (2016) in an article entitled Syria's strategic position in the confrontation between Russia and the United States, using aggressive realism, examines

the reasons for Syria's geopolitical and geostrategic importance for the United States and Russia. According to the results, the type of rivalry between the United States and Russia is in order to maintain their power and influence. The defeat of the Assad regime is a sign of the decline of power in Moscow, so Russia has made every effort to maintain the government of Bashar al-Assad and has prevented the spread of Western intervention and influence in the region. Afshin Zargar and Fatemeh Sadat Maloumi (2016) in an article have examined the type of Russian-American relations regarding the developments in Syria. According to the authors of this study, the civil war in Syria has increased the conflict of interests between Russia and the United States in the Middle East, and the two countries have been facing each other in order to maintain their interests and position on two opposing sides. Nicholas et al. (2020) considered the prospect of a military deployment in Syria as an opportunity to overcome the constraints imposed by Russia's geographical location, which traps it in the Arctic icy ports or behind Turkey. The authors also stressed out that one of Russia's goals in intervening in Syria was to use the Hamimim air base and seaport in Tartus in Syria, which intends to expand its operations to the eastern Mediterranean, southern Europe and northern Africa.

METHODS

The method of implementing the present study was descriptive -analytical. The data were collected and used through library resources using books, Persian and Latin articles in specialized databases and journals.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS: AGGRESSIVE REALISM

With the advent of the Biden administration, and in parallel with pursuing a defensive foreign policy, especially in the last decade, Russian President Vladimir Putin has sought to pursue an aggressive approach to his regional policy as you can see in Syria and Ukraine. The lack of reliable US support for Russia during the Islamic Awakening in the Middle East and the Syrian crisis has led Russia to pay special attention to the region. Zakaria and Mersheimer are among the most important theorists of aggressive realism (Moshirzadeh, 2011: 130). Given the basis of realism, this theory claims that one of the branches of power in politics is realism. The conditions of anarchy in the international arena believe that anarchy will witness constant competition between the great powers. From their point of view, anarchy has a Hobbesian state in which security is very scarce. Wealthy governments are building large armies to engage in cross-border issues in order to increase their influence, and they are seeking to increase their influence on the world stage (Zakaria, 1998:3). The argument of aggressive realism is that in anarchic environment,

governments seek to maximize their security and their power, and influence in the international arena by maximizing their power and influence. Aggressive realism is the most important tool for gaining a position of hegemony in the international system and achieving this goal of power. They mainly emphasize on military and economic power in world politics, because the greater a country's military power and advantage over others, the greater its security capability (Mearsheimer, 2001; Waltz, 1979, 1992). This approach emphasizes realism more than the actions of the big governments that are trying to change the status by shifting the realities of the system and achieve their strategic goals in the region. According to Mersheimer, achieving hegemony would be the ultimate goal of the great powers. In this context, it is important that what strategy do governments use to achieve their ultimate goal, which is hegemony? In this context, Mersheimer divides two strategies; the strategy of the first type is to achieve more relative power. On the other hand, it expresses the control of aggressive states and their prevention of gaining more relative power, which is to the detriment of the rival state; therefore, maximizing security can be considered a two-way game in which not only governments try to achieve greater comparative advantage, but also should try to prevent other governments from achieving it (Dashti et al., 2009: 8). On this basis, the great powers do not allow any other power to even reach regional hegemony, because any regional hegemony can eventually become a threat to them and provide them with regional weakness and isolation. This will help to change the equations and balance of power in favor of rival power and its allies in the region (Darj and Bagheri Dolat Abadi, 2016: 58).

DEVELOPMENTS IN SYRIA

The developments in Syria have gone through a complex, long and difficult process from the beginning until today, the continuation of which is influenced by the role of domestic and foreign actors involved in the crisis. Meanwhile, some countries supported the opponents of Bashar al-Assad's government and tried to overthrow the government, while others did their best to maintain Assad's power, which resulted in a complicated situation in this country. While the United States, the European Union, Turkey, and the Gulf states - particularly Qatar and Saudi Arabia - have openly sided with President Bashar al-Assad's armed opponents, Russia and Iran have opposed any pressure on Damascus.

HISTORY OF RUSSIA-SYRIA RELATIONS

Soviet-Syrian relations were close during the 1980s and early 1990s. The Soviet Union was an important source of assistance to Syria; therefore, Syria has always been under Russian influence. At that time, the Soviet Union was an

ally of other countries, such as Egypt, and in the context of the Cold War, they were united to varying degrees with the Soviet Union. In the case of Syria, the Soviet Union played a key role in shaping its political economy. In the years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Syrian regime lost an important source of aid, which was one of the reasons why Hafez al-Assad (Bashar al-Assad's father) and later Bashar al-Assad were forced to privatize basic industries and neoliberalize the economy which was the basic development in Syria from 2011 onwards. With the onset of the Syrian crisis, Russia's anti-Western stance and opposition to US intervention in the country were among the manifestations of the two countries' conflict in the Middle East. The presence and support of the Syrian government and the sending of weapons to this country are manifestations of the country's support for the Syrian government and the preservation of its old foothold in the Middle East. However, Russia's presence in the Middle East continues with its support for Syria, and maintaining the Assad government is a matter of prestige for Russia. But in this conflict, which has become a proxy war, any conflict is possible. Accordingly, Moscow will take a pro-Bashar al-Assad approach in a strategic alliance with Iran to revitalize and stabilize the Syrian political system and will not allow Western policies, especially the United States, to be implemented in response to the Syrian crisis (Darj and Bagheri Dolat Abadi, 2016: 58).

RUSSIA'S STRATEGY TOWARDS THE DEVELOPMENTS IN SYRIA

Russian leaders looked at the civil war in Syria in light of historical developments and believed that it was a definite result that the Syrian government would fall without Russian intervention. Accordingly, they believe that a successful campaign will prevent this instability in Syria, while at the same time increasing Russia's international credibility and neutralizing American interests. Realistically, the prospect of a military presence in Syria with easy access to the Mediterranean was seen as an opportunity to overcome the constraints imposed by Russia's geographical location, which traps it in the Arctic ice caps or behind Turkey. As a result, part of Russia's intentions to intervene stemmed from its long-standing agreement with Syria to use the Hamimim air base and seaport at Tartus in Syria, which extended Russia's operations to the eastern Mediterranean, southern Europe and northern Africa (Sinclair et al, 2020:3). Russia's strategy in Syria has been to support the regime in protesting a threat such as that of Bashar al-Assad. Russia's presence in Syria can be considered as a game changer. Because it was primarily because of Russia that the Assad regime was able to retake the entire city of Aleppo and then was able to retake areas on the outskirts of Damascus that were the headquarters of the opposition, and they did so mainly through the dominant air force. The Kremlin was able to save the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and change the course of the Syrian civil war, so it was the Russian air force and its military

support for the Syrian militias that changed the course of the game and led to the stability of the Assad regime. This approach by Russia led to a significant influence of Moscow against the United States and its regional partners, and made Moscow one of the leading players in the politics of power in the Middle East. Russia's strategy was revealed simultaneously along the military, diplomatic, and regional lines. Russia has never had a nation-building or reconstruction in Syria on its agenda. On the contrary, the Kremlin needs a government that is stable enough to protect Russia's interests, but not strong enough to no longer need Moscow's support. Unlike Western governments, which need to end the war and send troops back home, Russia has shown in Syria that it is satisfied with long-term, low-level clashes. President Putin called for Russia's experience in intervening in Syria to become a "model for resolving regional crises." Russia's main interest in Syria is to prevent the collapse of the current regime or the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad without Moscow's consent. In this regard, Moscow's approach inside Syria is to legitimize Putin through worldwide propaganda. Syria has ceded to Russia a strategic base called the Tartus Naval Base and a newly developed air base in Hamimim, near Latakia in the Mediterranean Sea and the Middle East. The war in Syria has allowed Russia to test new weapons systems in wartime and show the world that it has been massively re-equipping its military since 2010. Thus, Putin and the Russian military in Syria challenged the US-led international system. Russia has had long-standing interests in Syria for decades, and Russia's intervention in Syria suggests that Putin wants to use military power abroad and close working relations with the Assad regime and the vast network of communications that have existed for decades and were created in Syria. The intervention in Syria assured Russia that it could intervene decisively and challenge the Western response, which made Putin and the Russian military more courageous. Russia's involvement in Syria has brought it back to the Middle East as a world power and a mediator in the Middle East that can negotiate with all parties. The Syrian conflict has left Russia definitely in the Middle East. Russia's policies towards the Syrian crisis have different dimensions and reasons and can be expressed in different ways:

1. Trying to maintain geopolitical influence
2. Preservation of economic resources, especially the sale of military weapons
3. Demonstrate the power and promotion of international prestige
4. Strategic resistance to the West aimed at preventing the long-term plan of the Middle East from changing to its detriment.

That is why keeping Syria as the only Arab ally of Russia in the Arab world has become a priority in Russian politics. As a result, the Syrian crisis is moving in a different direction from other popular uprisings in the Arab world, and the most important reason is the deep geopolitical rivalry between

regional and trans-regional rival actors, which is increasingly involved in the Syrian crisis and deterring developments in the country (Niakoei and Bayat Ghiasi, 2014: 91).

In Syria, there were five dominant tendencies that were at odds with Russia's goals and influenced Russia's approach.

The first trend to be confronted was regime change in Syria. Western leaders thought that Assad's regime would fall. President Barack Obama called for Assad to resign in August 2011, saying it was time for President Assad to step down for the sake of the Syrian people. However, Putin, with the help of his ally in the Middle East with direct military support in the fall of 2015, sought to prevent the spread of color revolutions. In 2018, Russian author and military expert Savchenko wrote that the United States failed to achieve its goals in Syria because of the situation in the second half of 2015, when Russia began providing legal military support to the Syrian government, which brought about a change in the course of developments in Syria (Savchenko, 2018: 32). The second trend that Russia faced was the influence of non-governmental actors. The Russians were distrustful of NGOs whose activities were seen as secret proxies supporting Western goals (rt news, 2019). The Obama administration spent nearly \$ 10 billion in Syria, much of it funded by regional NGOs. These NGOs were delegitimized by the Russian media and routinely denied access to areas under Syrian control (Serhan, 2016).

The third trend that Russia faced was the international coalition against Syria. US seeks regional allies to strengthen US position and isolate Bashar al-Assad (Jay Newton-Small, 2016). Russia thwarted US efforts to obtain UN authorization and thwarted US alliances in the region by expanding diplomatic and military partnerships with Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Israel (Sylvia Westall and Dominic Evans, 2019). The fourth trend that Russia faced was proxy forces. In early 2012, the Obama administration recognized a coalition of Syrian opposition groups with military and financial support. In retaliation, Russia's first airstrikes in support of the Assad regime were carried out mainly against US-backed insurgents (Sinclair et al, 2020;5). The fifth and final course of action by Russia was to avoid large ground forces. The Russian military's economic operations in Syria rely on the sea, air, special forces and independent contractors, who handed over most of the ground battles to the Syrian Arab Army and Hezbollah allies backed by Iran (Sinclair et al, 2020;5). Russia made up for this shortage of manpower with strong support, command and control.

US STRATEGY TOWARDS THE DEVELOPMENTS IN SYRIA

The US approach, based on its strategic components, has been prominent since the beginning of the Syrian crisis as one of the main actors in the crisis. In order to secure its regional and international interests, it sought to change

the status quo and isolate Bashar al-Assad as a rebel. From the beginning, US foreign policy strategy was to eliminate Bashar al-Assad and weaken the Iran-Syria and Hezbollah Lebanese resistance. Another component that influenced the realistic approach of the United States of America was to weaken the veins of Russian influence in the Middle East (Zargar and Maloumi, 2016: 167). Thus, it can be said that the US strategy towards the developments in Syria is more to fill the power gap created in the areas that were previously under its control and to prevent the re-emergence of the Islamic State. For this reason, the Pentagon believes that they have no choice but to continue military intervention and expand their control over the Syrian-Iraqi border and even create a border force based on their local partners. While Russia wants to maintain the regime of Bashar al-Assad and its growing influence in Syria, and thus improve its position in the Middle East and the international arena (Dekel, 2018: 3). During Trump's presidency, the United States did not have a coherent policy toward Russia. Thus, the reduction of American forces in Iraq and Syria in 2020 greatly increased Iran's relative military position in the Middle East and its influence in Iraq and the Levant. Therefore, the failure of the United States to take decisive action in the face of developments in Syria has led to a large Russian presence in the region and an increase in Russia's regional influence (Cordesman & Hwang, 2020;197).

THE HOSTILE RELATIONS BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND RUSSIA OVER THE DEVELOPMENTS IN SYRIA

Syria has been a turning point in the hostile US-Russian relationship. Top US defense officials have prioritized practical mechanisms to counter military action, reduce escalation of threats, or unintentional confrontation with Russia. Nevertheless, many events have affected the approach and foreign policy of these actors. At various times, the United States has taken a variety of approaches, such as during the presidency of former President Barack Obama, discussions focused on sharing possible information and targeting terrorist groups. During Trump's presidency, US strategy took contradictory approaches and tended to be non-interfering in the conflict. Donald Trump's decision in October 2019 to withdraw US troops from northern Syria and leave US Kurdish partners, in addition to strengthening Russia, increased the risk of a resurgence of ISIS in the region (Chalfant, 2020). Therefore, Russia was able to take action after Trump's decision and fill the American vacuum. So another area that needs the cooperation of the United States and Russia is to pave the way for stability in Syria, where hundreds of thousands of civilians have been killed in the last few years. The United States and Russia have common interests in ending the conflict in Syria and preventing the resurgence of ISIS. As a result, a diplomatic process - requiring US-Russian cooperation - could reduce tensions. (Third Way, 2020:11). Russian President Vladimir

Putin has kept forms of closer cooperation on the table, both for propaganda purposes and as a lever of pressure on the United States. Putin himself made this the focus of the tumultuous Helsinki summit in July 2018. This article discusses the US-Russian strategy for the developments in Syria and why US-Russian military cooperation in Syria has failed to produce significant results. After Biden came to power, the question that always comes to mind is whether there is an opportunity for practical cooperation between Russia and the United States, despite differences in the strategic goals of the two countries? A closer look at US-Russian strategic relations in Syria can also help shed light on how the two countries' political leaders and military experts can maintain lines of communication. Given the two countries' conflicting strategic goals in Syria and the long-standing tensions between the intelligence and military actors on both sides, the prospect of cooperation has never been promising. As the Assad regime came under intense pressure in 2015 and the first months of 2016, US policy focused primarily on whether Russia could help support efforts to oust Assad and limit Iran's influence. Russia did not take such claims seriously by the United States, and the United States was not optimistic about cooperating with Russia. Russia and Iran began joint efforts in 2016 and 2017 to change the course of the conflict. Russia's tendency to take a balanced and aggressive approach to the United States began with the Ukraine crisis and the annexation of Crimea to Russia, and led to a military confrontation between the two powers across the eastern Mediterranean. The adoption of Russia's new naval doctrine in July 2016 is a support for the advancement of Russia's new regionalist policies regarding Russia's privacy. The document obliges the Russian navy to have a military presence in the Mediterranean by dominating permanent bases to counter NATO naval formation in the Mediterranean and NATO's southern foothills (Persson, 2016:11). Amid continued Russian pressure on US-backed Syrian forces, US commanders opposed Russian efforts to oust the United States from parts of Syria targeted by the Assad regime. On the other hand, Russia's suspicion of the distribution of power in the current international system has often been due to US unilateralism and its display of militarism. In fact, one of Russia's concerns has been the West's political, economic, and military presence in its spheres of influence. The Russians believe that they face serious threats from the West, especially the United States, and consider many global developments, such as the expansion of NATO, the deployment of missile shields, etc., as a fundamental and important challenge against their interests. In fact, the US aggressive approach, which seeks to limit Russia's geopolitical and political spheres to its borders and ultimately vulnerability to its strategic depth, is a variable that prompts Moscow to react, reminiscent of a Cold War-like era. Therefore, in response to US actions, Russia has implemented a diverse range of reactions to balance US hegemonic policies. The Syrian crisis provided an opportunity for Moscow to confront Washington's policies. From Russia's point of view, its silence or cooperation

in the face of US actions will strengthen its hegemonic power; therefore, Moscow decided to play a strong and fundamental role in the Syrian crisis, in order to ensure its security on the one hand, and to strengthen its credibility and position in the regional and global arenas on the other hand (Darayandeh and Ahmadi, 2019: 3). Russia is a natural ally of those seeking to increase its capabilities in international relations. The United States and Europe must accept that the world order is changing. Russia is not and will not be part of the West, but sees itself as a stabilizing force that prefers tradition and practice over sentiment and ideology (Dimitri, 2013: 2). Accordingly, Russia has not yet been able to challenge the United States economically, but with very limited use of its forces and support from other countries and non-state actors, it has achieved in Eastern Europe, Ukraine, and Syria (Anthony, et al, 2021: 28). As Putin's war in Ukraine unfolds, it is clear that operations in Syria have helped create this new Russian-centered world order to use military force and diplomatic force to intimidate and silence the opposition. The leaders of the Persian Gulf states have made it clear that one of their biggest concerns in the coming years is the possibility of getting caught up in a new Cold War between Washington and Beijing. Therefore, the future of this crisis will be determined by the current process of cooperation and tension, domestic, regional and international requirements and the interests of each of the actors in this crisis, especially powerful actors such as Russia and the United States at the international level.

CONCLUSION

The Syrian crisis can be seen as an example of a competitive environment in which regional and supra-regional powers seek to weaken rival governments and maintain and increase their sphere of influence in the country. In recent years, many Middle East experts have seen the rivalry between Russia and the United States as part of a major war across the Middle East. In this regard, both countries play a significant role in regional crises and the main cause of divergence in relations between the two countries is their competition for the Middle East. In connection with the strategy of the two important and influential countries on the developments in the Middle East and Syria, the strategy of Russia and the United States has always been a model of coexistence and fluctuation. After September 2015, with Russia's military support for Syria, a pattern of conflict prevailed in the relations between the two countries, the main reason for which can be considered the trans-regional and geopolitical rivalry between the two countries. The interests of the United States and Russia are common in mediating peace in Syria, and despite the different approaches, it can be said that the strategies of the two countries have been quite similar. They are significantly dependent on the air force with a small number of troops on the ground, and in both cases, they were able to

turn the tide against their respective enemies. Russia's aggressive approach to defending its only traditional ally (Syria) in the eastern Mediterranean is an important step in shifting the balance of power in favor of long-term strategic interests in the Middle East.

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